

SAC's 'Fail Safe' Keeps False Alarms From Turning Into War

By
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OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE, Neb., April 9—Imagine that you are commander of a B-52 jet bomber of the United States Strategic Air Command. You are in flight toward an enemy target. You are carrying thermo-nuclear bombs, capable of more destructive force than the combined American and British Air Forces delivered in all of World War II.

This is not practice. Eight minutes ago you were dispatched from base. You are bound northward across the Pole, flying faster than the speed of sound.

Fourteen minutes ago your base and every other SAC base in the world, received a flash from the Dewline (Distant early warning) network across Northern Canada that the radar scopes indicated a convergence of foreign objects flying swiftly toward the United States.

The foreign objects are too fast to be aircraft. Is this a flight of intercontinental missiles with atomic warheads bound for the cities of the United States and Canada?

15-Minute Warning.

Flight-time for missiles from Eastern Europe to North America is 30 minutes. The Dewline gave your base 15 minutes warning. Your aircraft was the last of the sortie off the runway; you were airborne in six minutes; you have been flying for eight minutes; enemy missiles which must have passed you in flight would be due to strike North America in one minute. Other United States bombers are in the air all over the world with reprisal bombs.

But this is one thing that you alone do not know: Since your takeoff, the foreign objects picked up on the radar scopes turned out to be a shower of meteorites.

Other aircraft in your sortie have been turned back by radio, but in spite of the trigger-quick efficiency of the command which dispatched you, and of the pilot aircraft under your hand, there has been a failure.

Someone has said that a battle is a series of errors and victory goes to the side that makes the fewest number. The error in which you find yourself is that you did not receive a turn-back signal.

Invasion Plan.

You have been dispatched with a complete invasion plan. Routes across the enemy border to your target. Alternate routes to an alternate target.

Routes across the face of the enemy country and out again. You have more than one atomic bomb. You have fuel for 6000 miles.

Do you proceed to your target, does your bombardier press the button and does the first atomic bomb go "down the chimney" to start World War III? All this because one of SAC's vast fleet of bombers failed to receive a turn-back order?

Not so. You are saved, you and many others, by a powerfully simple plan called "Fail Safe." It is proof against error, human or mechanical.

"Fail Safe" simply instructs you to proceed toward your target for a fixed number of

nautical miles and then turn back—"Fail Safe"—if for any reason you do not at that point and at that moment receive coded orders to continue to your target.

Happens Many Times.

This actually has happened many times. The great counter-offensive striking force of the SAC has been sped on its way by alerts created by meteoric flights registering on the dewline radar scopes, or by interference of high frequency transmitters creating artificial "blips," or by the appearance of foreign objects on the scope flying in seeming formation, which simply never have been explained.

"The compression of time in the atomic age is such that SAC must be in constantly alert status and ready for instantaneous counter-attack," says Gen. Thomas S. Power, SAC's commander-in-chief.

Time does not permit holding bombing aircraft on the ground while alarms are investigated. The investigations take place while the bombers are on their way toward the target.

The Air Force planners believe that if World War III occurs, the atomic exchange phase will all be over in the first four hours.

An Order to Continue.

But you are at the controls of the B-52 again, your radio is functioning, you have reached the "Fail Safe" line. This time, instead of an order to return or no orders at all, a rasping voice in your ear-

Let a colonel at the Strategic Air Command here picture the rest of it for you:

"You know that the President of the United States has authorized your attack. This is the moment for which you have sweated long years of training, leaving the awesome business of just exactly how you will wipe a target off the face of the earth in one fraction of a second.

"Your route into the enemy's country, every detail of your target and the task before you, are burned deep into your memory. You have practiced this mission, now become reality, until you could carry it out blindfolded.

Failed to Keep Peace.

"This is the moment you have dedicated your life to prevent. The pit of your stomach is sick with the thing you must do and sick with the knowledge that you and all the people of the Strategic Air Command have failed to keep the peace.

"For this is SAC's primary mission, its reason for being: to be stronger and grow stronger, to deter the enemy from ever exploding a nuclear bomb in anger."

The next time you see a vapor trail high in the spring-time sky, consider the chance that if the microscopic speck ahead of it is a bomber, it will have in its bay a greater destructive force than this country and Britain together were able to deliver on ruined Germany all through World War II.

If the aircraft is heading northward, join a silent prayer with that of the man at the controls that it will have reason to "Fail Safe."